
Impersonal *you* and the impact of modality: competing motivations in language change

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The recent development of the English human impersonal pronoun (HIP) *you* (as in *You only live once*) serves as an interesting example of how conflicting modality-related pressures affect linguistic changes. I will first give an overview of the pronoun's history and secondly consider competing motivations affecting how the HIP has changed throughout the recent history of English. These include:

(i) Involvement vs. generalization. As an originally deictic term of address, the HIP *you* evokes joint empathy between speaker and hearer (Deringer et al. 2015: 323–325), and thus feels at home in the language of immediacy. The newer function of generalizing across individuals makes it less tied to the immediate context of a conversation (“contextual dissociation” in Koch & Oesterreicher’s [2012: 450] terms). (ii) Normative pressure. If impersonal *you* occurs in written English, it tends to be restricted to conceptually more ‘oral’ texts (see Fastrich 2014 on online reviews), even in cases where more recent extensions of impersonal meaning, such as in the case of simulation (where the hearer is not part of the group generalized over), weaken the HIP’s context embeddedness. (iii) Intimization. The rise in the frequency of 2SG HIPs cross-linguistically has been linked to the ‘intimization’ of spoken discourse (e.g., Jensen & Gregersen 2016). Such findings could also explain the popularity of English *you* wherever the modality allows intimization. (v) Availability of alternative expressions. Contrastive findings suggest that the default status of a given HIP, and therefore its role in spoken vs. written language, also depends on which other HUPs a language has available and the types of impersonal meanings they convey. The Middle English loss of a HIP equivalent to the ‘man’ impersonal that still plays a role in German and other languages could be an additional factor contributing to the increasing acceptability of HIP *you* across modalities (Haas 2023: 112–133).

References. Deringer, L., V. Gast, F. Haas & O. Rudolf (2015). Impersonal uses of the second person singular and generalized empathy: an exploratory corpus study of English, German and Russian. In S. Sorlin & L. Gardelle (eds), *The pragmatics of personal pronouns*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 311–334. • Fastrich, B. (2024). Construal and impersonalization in German and English: comparing impersonal pronouns in online hotel reviews. *Lingua* 308: 103773. • Haas, F. (2023). *A diachronic perspective on English human impersonal pronouns*. Habilitation thesis, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, Germany. • Jensen, T. J. & F. Gregersen (2016). What do(es) you mean? The pragmatics of generic second person pronouns in modern spoken Danish. *Pragmatics* 26. 417–446.